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THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION-PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS IN THE SIEGE AND DEFENSE OF A FORTRESS ACCORDING TO AL-HARAWI'S TREATISE: SALAH AD-DIN AND THE FORTRESS OF MASYAF

Abstract

The discussion of so-called "hybrid warfare" is gaining increasing popularity in today's scientific literature. This term became widely known among interested circles after a report by Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, at the Academy of Military Sciences in January 2013, which was later published in a scientific journal and was called the "Gerasimov Doctrine" (we will not discuss the authenticity and originality of the concepts in this article) (Gerasimov 2013). Soon after the article was published, the world began to discuss the fact that conducting military campaigns does not only involve military force, but to achieve the ultimate goal, it is necessary to take multifaceted action using non-military elements. Although "hybrid war" in its conceptual form became known to a wide audience only after the publication of V. Gerasimov's article, historical examples demonstrate that this tactic has been employed in nearly all military conflicts throughout history. The description of the elements of the so-called "hybrid warfare" is found in historical works, where the authors speak about the need to diversify the impact on the enemy. This article is devoted to the "hybrid" tactics discussed by the medieval Arab author Al-Harawi, in particular, the importance of information-psychological operations in the siege of fortresses. In the article, we will try to analyze one specific example of the mentioned tactic – Salah ad-Din's siege of the fortress of Masyaf.

Keywords: Information-psychological operations, Salah ad-Din, Assassins, Masyaf fortress, medieval warfare.

In military campaigns, elements of "hybrid warfare", including information and psychological operations, are of grand and sometimes decisive importance. Psychological impact on the enemy and morale breaking of vulnerable groups through the dissemination of well-calculated disinformation are a significant prerequisite for victory. There are many examples of this in world history. Since ancient times, military commanders and political leaders have tried, and still try, to create an appropriate information and psychological field to weaken the enemy, to cause distrust and disorder in the enemy's camp, which will prevent one from achieving its military and political goals.

The elements of "hybrid warfare" are well described in the work of the medieval Arab author al-Harawi – *Al-Harawi's Treatise on Military Tricks*[1]. In this article, we focus on the chapters in the

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[1] For information about al-Harawi and his work, see Narimanishvili, G., and D. Beradze. 2024. "Information, Spies and Secrecy in a 12th Century Arab Military Treatise". *Free University Journal of Asian Studies,* no. 6 (December). Tbilisi. https://journals.org.ge/index.php/asianstudies/article/view/176; Díaz, O. T. 2014. *"Al-Taḏkira al-Harawiyya: Un Espejo De Príncipes Singular."* Facultad de Filología, Grado en Estudios Árabes e Islámicos, Trabajo de Fin de Grado, Curso 2013/2014, Tutor: Rafael Valencia Rodríguez, Universidad de Sevilla; Sourdel-Thomine, J. 1961. "Les Conseils du Šayh Al-Harawi a un Prince Ayyubide." In *Bulletin d'études orientales* 17 (1961-1962): 205-268; Sourdel-Thomine, J. 1986. "Al-Harawī al-Mawṣilī."

aforementioned treatise devoted to the siege of fortresses and defense during a siege. The famous scholar William James Hamblin considers the chapter dedicated to the siege of fortresses to be the most significant part of al-Harawi's work. According to him, this chapter not only covers standard methods of sieges but also suggests various special tactics for capturing cities and fortresses in a short time, without great expense and without a full-scale attack. To illustrate the practicality of the content of the text, Hamblin discusses the example of Salah ad-Din's siege of Bourzey, also known as Mirza Castle (Hamblin 1992, 232-234).

Our goal is not to provide a military analysis of the tactics presented in al-Harawi's work, but rather to discuss the use of hybrid elements in complex operations. In particular, we will try to analyze the effectiveness of information-psychological operations during the siege of the fortress using the example of Salah ad-Din's siege of the Masyaf fortress.

Al-Harawi discusses siege warfare and defense in chapters XXI and XXIII of his work, and also discusses the use of asymmetric methods and informational-psychological operations in siege conditions. According to the Arab author, the psychological stability of the attackers and defenders during a siege is one of the main prerequisites for success. Al-Harawi emphasizes that any leader or commander is obliged to take care of the well-being and morale of his subordinates. According to al-Harawi, if a commander intends to organize a siege, he:

> Should not attack a strong fortress or fortified place until he has won the hearts of his people, soldiers, commanders, and generals with everything he can and is able to do; and he has also satisfied all the desires and demands of the nobles and emirs, and this should precede the campaign and siege (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 23)[2].

On the other hand, a ruler in defense is also obliged to take care of his surroundings:

> If the enemy marches against him [the ruler] and he is unable to resist, cannot defend himself, or meet him face to face, he must immediately strengthen his army, win the hearts of his comrades, military commanders, and subordinates with everything he can and is able to do. ...He must correct those whose bad qualities he notices, show the right direction to those going the wrong way, and encourage the spiritually unstable.... He must win the hearts of builders and engineers, night watchmen, archers, artillerymen, and the best fighters and not leave them unattended (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 26).

In addition, the author describes methods that can be used to undermine the enemy's psychological stability and gain a tactical advantage. Al-Harawi advises the commander of an attacking army to use the effects of speed and scale to break the morale of the besieged, although he also warns against giving in to emotions himself:

> [The commander] should immediately lay siege and start an attack, surprise the population [of the fortress] with the ferocity of the battle, and not slow down [the attack], and [thus] he will gain victory and obtain what he desires. He should reduce difficulties if it is beneficial and not relax or become angry, for this will weaken him and rob him of strength (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 23).

According to the author, this effect will affect the fighting ability of those under siege, and they may feel the desire to capitulate:

> He should know that the capture of a strong fortress or fortified place, its ruthless destruction, the defiling of its honor by furious attacks, and the conquest by force or by agreement, the facts of fear, intensified attacks, ruthlessness, and violence will cause unrest in the country. After this, [the commander] should not stop attacking the fortress or fortified place, then the inhabitants of it [the fortress or fortified place] may write to him [the commander], and the rulers may send ambassadors and, fearing him, offer to surrender the fortress, because they want his rule and fear his power (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 23-24).

In *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition Prepared by a Number of Leading Orientalists, edited by B. Lewis, V. L. Menage, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht, vol. III, 178. Leiden: Brill and London: Lizac and Co.

Al-Harawi also speaks about the importance of the surprise effect on the part of the defenders, which should, with a high probability, disrupt the attackers' plans:

> He should wait for the darkest hour of the night, and should take as many unfit and useless horses as possible, and place them around the soldiers, and tie dried buffalo and old antelope skins to their tails, and then drive these horses towards the enemy's camp with whips and inflicting great pain, accompanied by deafening noise, terrifying sounds, and terrible screams. When they see that the [enemy's] army is in confusion and disorder, then they should attack from all sides with cavalry and infantry, supported by a massive fire of incendiary and oil shells from the artillery, as a result of which the hearts of the soldiers will tremble and the soldiers will be terrified. Together with them [mainly the attacking troops], the warriors who are hiding behind the hills and down the mountains should join the battle and take part in the attack. This is an excellent trick, a great and grand trick. No army can resist it and will be severely defeated, and [someone] will rarely survive it. If [the commander] has crushed the enemy, he will achieve his goal and get what he wants. If he fails to do this, after making such an effort, the enemy's forces will still be weakened, the army will be confused, and the situation will worsen. Tricks sow fear in the hearts of the cowards, while the display of courage and fearlessness shakes courage and increases anxiety (in the enemy); they say that Alexander [of Macedon] said this (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 28).

Al-Harawi writes that after the siege of a fortress, the commander must gain support from the local ordinary population by creating a safe environment for them. Having achieved this goal, the commander-in-chief must conduct active informational and psychological measures directly in the enemy camp, where he must instill feelings of distrust and the impossibility of getting out of the situation. He must also find vulnerable individuals or persons whose personal ambitions can be exploited and bribed. In addition, the author warns the commander that the target audience should not include people with strong moral principles and/or fanatics:

> And if he arrives at the land he has conquered and does not want to leave it, then he must pacify the peasants and the defenseless population, send those who will defend and resist military crimes, and this has two purposes: the first is that they will supply the army with food and all necessary products, and the second is that when the population of the besieged fortress and the occupied lands learn of this, they will understand that the king will not retreat, their enthusiasm will disappear, they will relax, their efforts will weaken, and differences of opinion will arise. Then he [the commander] should write to the inhabitants and commanders of the fortress and offer to fulfill their [commanders'] demands, so that some of them will understand that some of them have a connection with him [the commander] and want to communicate with him, but he [the commander] should not reveal anyone openly and keep the details secret, so that each of them will suspect the other and try to get closer to [the commander] himself, so that they can gain his [the commander's] support and cooperation. He should promise them the expansion of lands and possessions, so that he can achieve his goal and obtain the desired [result] without unnecessary hardship and hard work. He should not refuse to correspond with their clergy and officials and their followers, because among them there are those who are weak in faith, who justify themselves and betray, who strive for the life of this world and do not care about the next, who are foolish and headstrong, who are greedy for the welfare of this world and high positions, who try to gain the favor of nobles and kings, who indulge in debauchery with young people, with their help he will achieve what he wants, but he should beware of monks and ascetics, with their help he will not achieve what he wants, because they are strong and stubborn in faith and do not consider this world to be anything, which prevents them from interfering in the affairs of the world. I have tested them; this experience does not raise any doubt, and I do not know of anything that could contradict this (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 24).

Al-Harawi also recommends the use of information-psychological operations for those under siege:

> He should send people into the enemy's army who will spread lies and sow panic among the warriors. [Those who] will spread false information in their homeland about the devastation of their lands, the death of family members, the killing of nobles, and the division among the high priests [?], disturbing rumors and destructive illusions that will weaken their strength and shake their spirit and create doubts in their hearts. He should communicate with their emirs, write to their commanders about what concerns their own needs, and what flatters their character, in order to divide their thoughts and

confuse their plans. He should also show his own firmness, strength, military power, and indifference towards the enemy's lands (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 27).

Finally, as a last resort, the author advises a leader under siege to use foreign connections:

[The ruler] should refrain from sending envoys to the enemy, except in the case of returning a reply, because this would demonstrate his strong position, the inaccessibility of the fortress, and the enemy's insignificance. He should ask for help against the enemy from other rulers, [the enemy's] enemies, and neighbors, so that they can attack [the enemy's] lands and invade [the enemy's] territories. I believe that tricks are better than asking for military aid from someone else, because the one whom [the ruler] asks for help against the enemy will learn of his weaknesses and feebleness, and will become greedy and may misuse [his knowledge] at another time (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 28).

It is possible that one of the inspirations for the advice and opinions expressed by al-Harawi was the siege of Masyaf Castle by Salah ad-Din. Masyaf Castle is located in the central part of Syria, in the Hama governorate. Until recently, the castle was a tourist attraction; however, during the Syrian Civil War, military units were stationed there, and many buildings were damaged during the bombing.

In the Middle Ages, Masyaf Castle was of strategic importance, controlling the route from central Syria to the Mediterranean coast. In the 12th century, the fortress was in the hands of followers of the Ismaili sect, also known as the Order of Assassins[3], led by Rashid ad-Din Sinan, also known as the "Old Man of the Mountain"[4]. It was during this period that the famous Egyptian Sultan Salah ad-Din was establishing positions in the Middle East and conducting military campaigns in the territory of Syria and Iraq[5].

Salah ad-Din, who became the unifier of Muslims, the defender of orthodox Islam, and the main hero of the Holy War, was the primary enemy of the Ismailis. In an attempt to neutralize Salah ad-Din, the Assassins launched two attacks against him in 1174/1175 and 1176, but both were unsuccessful (Lewis 1953, 239; Kamāl al-Dīn 1996, 371). In August 1176, Salah ad-Din invaded Ismaili territory and besieged the fortress of Masyaf, but failed to achieve his goal. There are several different versions of this campaign's failure. Most Arab historians report that Salah ad-Din retreated at the request of his uncle, the governor of Hama, Shihab ad-Din Ahmad ibn Takashi, to whom the Ismailis had appealed for mediation with the Sultan. In the version of the Aleppo biographer Kamal ad-Din, we read that it was Salah ad-Din, frightened by the policy of the Assassins, who asked his uncle to mediate with the Ismailis so that he could leave safely. Finally, according to Ismaili authors, the Sultan was frightened by Sinan's supernatural power and, through his uncle's intercession, obtained permission to leave the Ismaili territories safely. Eventually, Salah ad-Din and Sinan reached an agreement, and after the Sultan left Ismaili territory, the Assassins never again attacked him (Lewis 1966, 124).

Based on the information preserved in historical sources, we can assume that Sinan resorted to both diplomatic and asymmetric methods of warfare to prevent the threat posed by Salah ad-Din. Indirect evidence of the Ismailis' use of information-psychological operations is found in a story told by the Arab historian Ibn al-Athir.

When Salah ad-Din left Aleppo, as we have already mentioned, in the month of Muharram, he set out to invade the lands of the Ismailis to fight them in retaliation for what they had done against him and for the attempt to kill him. He [Salah ad-Din] ravaged, plundered, and burned their lands, laid siege to and catapulted the castle of Masyaf, which is their [Ismailis] greatest fortress and strongest citadel. He besieged those who were there, which continued [for some time]. Sinan, the leader of the Ismailis, sent [an embassy mission] to Salah ad-Din's uncle [on his mother's side], Shihab ad-Din al-Haram, the ruler of Hama, to intercede and resolve the matter. [Sinan threatened him] and said: If you do not

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[3] For information on Ismailis, the history and activities of the Order of Assassins, see Narimanishvili, G. 2012. *Assassins – Myths and Reality.* Tbilisi: Mtsignobari.

[4] For information on the Ismaili activities in Syria and the "Old Man of the Mountain", see Narimanishvili, G. 2015. "Salah al-Din and Syrian Assassins", In *Badania nad swiatem islamu*, edited by Marta Wozniak and Dorota Scislewska, 211-221. Lodz; Lewis, B. 1953. "Saladin and the Assassins." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London,* Vol. 15, No. 2: 239-245.

[5] For information on Salah ad-Din campaigns, see Gibb, Sir Hamilton A. R. 1969. "The Rise of Saladin, 1169 – 1189." In *A History of the Crusades,* general editor Kenneth M. Setton, *Vol I: The First Hundred Years,* edited by Marshall W. Baldwin, 563-589. Madison, Milwaukee & London: The University of Wisconsin Press.

do this, I will kill you and the entire family of Salah ad-Din. He [Shihab ad-Din] also stood up and asked for [the Ismailis'] mercy. He [Salah ad-Din] agreed, made an agreement [with Ismailis], and left. His [Salah ad-Din's] army was tired of the extended fighting, and they had accumulated the trophy they had obtained from the Mosul troops and the plunder of the Ismailis' lands. They asked [Salah ad-Din] to return home and rest, whereupon he agreed and returned with his army to Egypt (Ibn al-Athīr 2003, 81).

First of all, Ibn al-Athir's notes demonstrate that Salah ad-Din was not acting according to the tactics discussed by al-Harawi. He acted emotionally and, supposedly, severely punished the local population. Most likely, the Sultan also failed to quell the discord among the defenders of the fortress or bribe anyone. Al-Harawi may be referring to this very case when he writes in his work that, based on personal experience, "monks and ascetics" cannot be bribed. Accordingly, we can assume that the author of the treatise directly participated in the siege of Masyaf. On the other hand, the tactics of Sinan, who resorted to both diplomatic means and asymmetric methods, are interesting. Particularly noteworthy is Ibn al-Athir's information about the issues of combat motivation in Salah ad-Din's army, as well as Kamal al-Din's report regarding Salah ad-Din's emotional state. On the one hand, the army was "tired" from the battles and desperately wanted to return home, while on the other hand, the Sultan realized that he was in a dead end and planned to lift the siege without losing reputation. Perhaps it was precisely the result of Sinan's followers' active work that nihilistic sentiments emerged in the victorious army in Mosul and Aleppo, and the Sultan was ready to deny revenge. On the other hand, Sinan must have wanted a quick end to the conflict, since it would be difficult for him to deal with Salah ad-Din for a long time. Accordingly, a solution was found in the form of Shihab al-Din, who reconciled the opposing sides and defused the situation. Although Salah ad-Din saved face at Masyaf and subsequently achieved grand victories, al-Harawi's work contains indirect criticism of the Sultan:

> [A commander] should not lay siege to a fortress that is too large, too strong for his army, and [that he will be defeated against], because retreating after the siege has begun is equal to shame and defeat (Al-Harawiyyi n.d., 23).
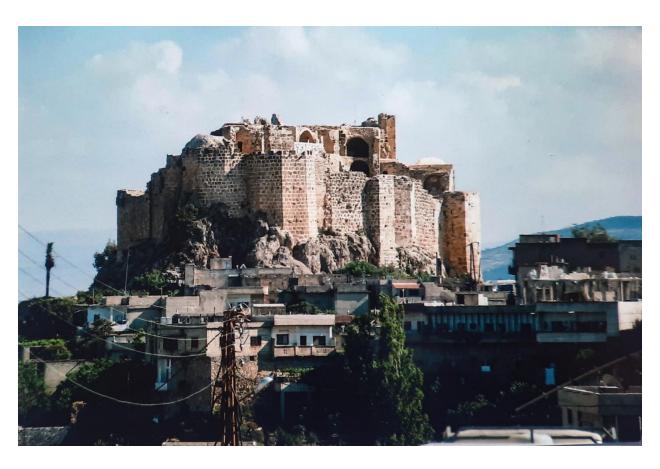
In conclusion, al-Harawi appears to have conducted a thorough analysis of the mistakes committed during Saladin's campaigns, which he critically examines throughout his work. Notably, the experience at the Masyaf fortress appears to have influenced the author's particular emphasis on information-psychological operations and asymmetric tactics, particularly in the chapters addressing siege warfare. Despite the evolution of combat technologies and strategic communication systems, the core principles of information-psychological warfare articulated by al-Harawi have endured across centuries and continue to play a significant role in contemporary military and political strategies.

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Appendix

MASYAF CASTLE

(Photo taken by George Narimanishvili in 2006)